The Hidden History of Delaware County's Ice Houses and Ice Harvesting
By: Carla Welsh (née Seitz)
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Photo of an ice house. The location and date are unknown; however, it likely was not taken in Delaware County. This photo was found in an online auction listing and included here to illustrate what an ice house looked like.

Before modern refrigeration, ice was harvested from local lakes and ponds during the winter and stored in ice houses for use during the warmer months. Delaware County, Pennsylvania, once had numerous ice houses, ranging from small structures on private properties to large commercial operations. In 1888, an incredible 5,000 tons of ice was stored at Ridley Park Lake alone.

Very little has been written about the history of ice houses and ice harvesting in Delaware County. While researching the subject, the author found numerous references in *The Morton Chronicle* during the 1880s, documenting ice houses throughout the county. The author has transcribed a selection of those articles below.

Earlier ice houses were often built underground, or had deep subterranean pits where the ice was stored. George Washington's ice house at Mount Vernon, for example, had a deep underground pit used for storing ice. Another possible example was discovered much closer to home. During archaeological work at the Caleb Pusey House in Upland, Josephine Albrecht uncovered a stone subterranean pit, approximately five feet square and six-and-a-half feet deep, which she believed may have been used to store ice cut from the creek and layered in sawdust from the nearby mill.

By the late 1800s, however, ice houses were commonly being built above ground. An interesting newspaper article from 1882 specifically explains that an ice house did not need to be underground, and that an above-ground ice house worked just as well. After researching and transcribing numerous articles about Delaware County ice houses from the 1880s, it appears there may have been a gradual change in how ice houses were being constructed, from the earlier use of underground pits to structures above ground.

Also included are rare photographs of the former ice house on the George Burnley "Tuscarora" property, which may be the only known photos of a Delaware County ice house to exist. These photos were shared with the author by a former resident of the property. Though the ice house is long gone, the Burnley mansion still stands along Darby Creek in Drexel Hill, near the Garrett Road/Bishop Avenue bridge, along with a subterranean arched-roof chamber, which has an opening in the rear leading to a stone well. It is not known whether the well or chamber may have been associated with the nearby ice house.

Ice house, left, in the side yard of George Burnley's "Tuscarora" mansion house along Darby Creek in Drexel Hill, near the walking path and Garrett Road/Bishop Avenue bridge. Note the second structure, right, which protrudes only a few feet above ground. Inside is an arched-roof chamber with an opening at the rear that leads to a stone well. Photo shared with the author by a former resident of the house.

Close-up view of the second structure, showing the portion that protrudes only a few feet above ground. Beneath it is a subterranean, arched-roof chamber with an opening at the rear leading to a stone well. It is not known whether the well or chamber may have been associated with the nearby ice house (on left). Photo shared with the author by a former resident of the George Burnley “Tuscarora” property.

Additional photos of the ice house on the former George Burnley “Tuscarora” property along Darby Creek in Drexel Hill. Photos shared with the author by a former resident of the house.

Photo of George Burnley's "Tuscarora" Mansion on Darby Creek, Drexel Hill, built circa 1844–1855. The ice house and subterranean arched-roof chamber with a stone well was located in the side yard, to the left of the house. Photo taken by the author February 2026.

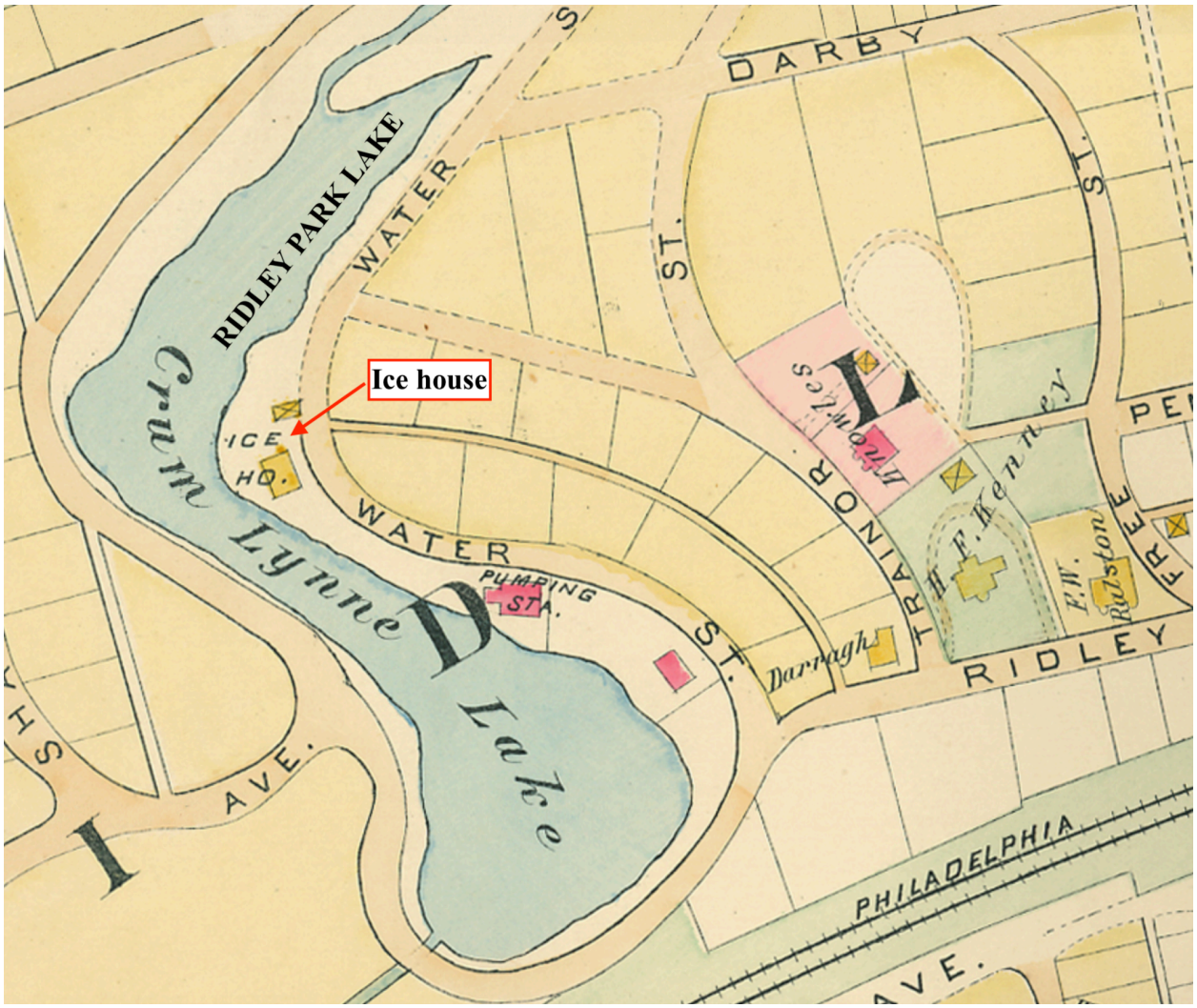
Views looking inside the subterranean, arched-roof chamber in the side yard of George Burnley's "Tuscarora" mansion. The opening at the rear leads to a stone well. The ice house stood immediately to the left of this structure. It is not known whether the well or chamber was somehow connected to the ice house or served a related purpose. Photos taken by the author, February 2026.

Photo taken by the author in February 2026, showing the stone ruins of the ice house at George Burnley's "Tuscarora" mansion on Darby Creek, Drexel Hill, Delaware County, Pennsylvania.

The following articles are transcribed by the author from *The Morton Chronicle*, a newspaper published in Morton, Delaware County, Pennsylvania:

16 DEC 1880: The filling of the ice houses at T. T. Dunwoody, at Lenni, was commenced on Saturday last, with ice eight inches in thickness.

12 JAN 1882: A novel ice house has just been built on the premises of Edward Walden, Esquire, Spring Hill [today's Secane, Upper Darby]. It is 16 by 16 feet in dimensions and is built above the ground, so as to allow the air to circulate under the floor. The floor consists of strips, with open spaces between them, the intention being to place the ice in the centre of the floor, cover it with a foot and a half of sawdust, and allow the air to circulate around it and pass out through a large ventilator which has been provided at the top of the building. The theory is that the air, passing around the heap, will keep the sawdust dry, and thus preserve the ice.



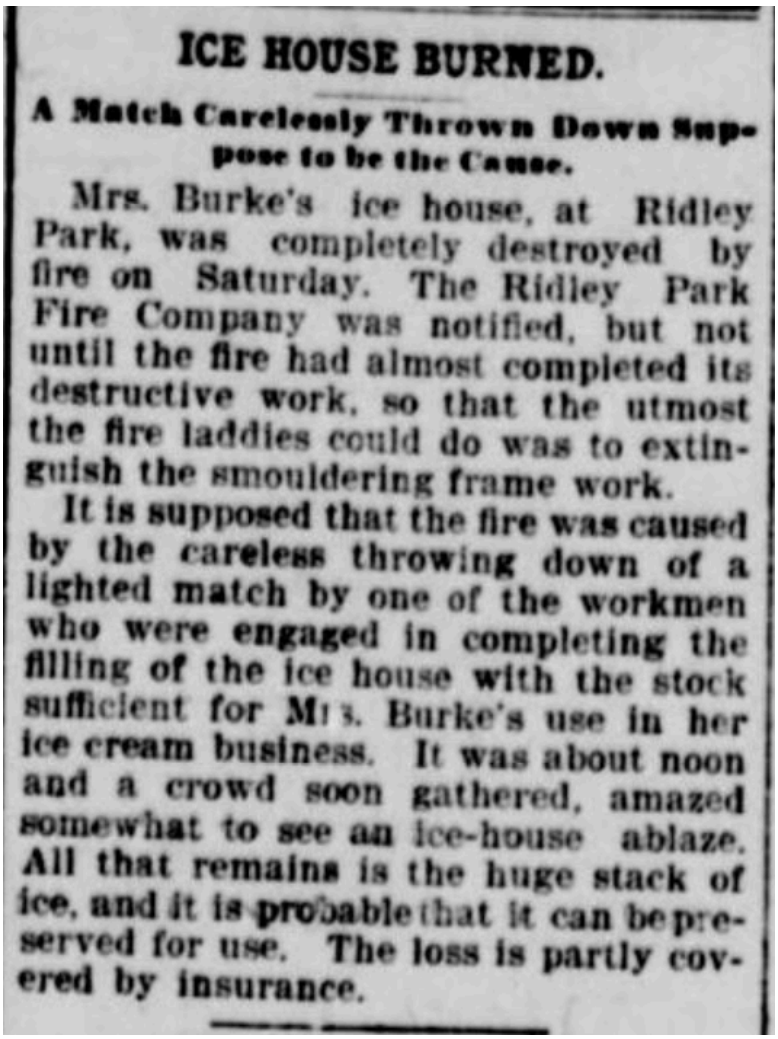
1892 Borough of Ridley Park and Prospect Park, Ridley Township: Ridley Park, Plate 9, via Keith Lockhart's website: DelawareCountyHistory.com. Ice house at Ridley Park Lake.

1 FEB 1882: The mammoth ice house of Mr. Bradley, at Ridley Park Lake, is about two-thirds full of excellent ice.

15 FEB 1883: On Saturday last, James Bradley, nephew of Thomas Bradley, the ice dealer, fell from the top of the ice house at Ridley Park lake, a distance of 34 feet, and sustained severe internal injuries. He was removed to the house of John McKnabe, nearby, where he is now under medical treatment.

5 JAN 1888: The Chester Ice Company is filling its mammoth ice house at Ridley Park Lake.

2 FEB 1888: 5,000 tons of ice have been stored in the ice house at Ridley Park Lake. Some of it is 12 inches in thickness.



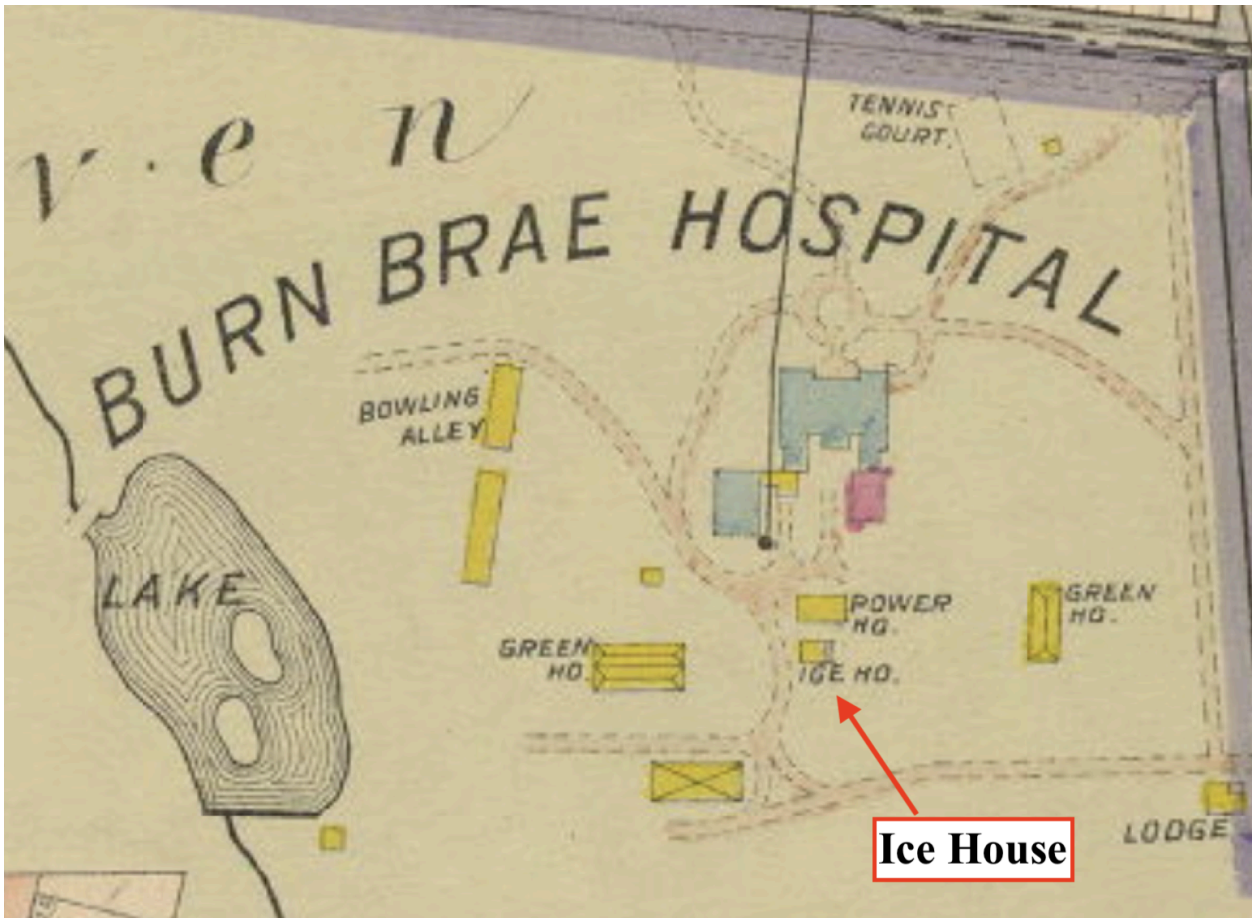
ICE HOUSE BURNED.

A Match Carelessly Thrown Down Supposed to be the Cause.

Mrs. Burke's ice house, at Ridley Park, was completely destroyed by fire on Saturday. The Ridley Park Fire Company was notified, but not until the fire had almost completed its destructive work, so that the utmost the fire laddies could do was to extinguish the smouldering frame work.

It is supposed that the fire was caused by the careless throwing down of a lighted match by one of the workmen who were engaged in completing the filling of the ice house with the stock sufficient for Mrs. Burke's use in her ice cream business. It was about noon and a crowd soon gathered, amazed somewhat to see an ice-house ablaze. All that remains is the huge stack of ice, and it is probable that it can be preserved for use. The loss is partly covered by insurance.

Chester Times (Chester, PA), February 24, 1896. The article describes an ice house at Ridley Park that was destroyed by fire. Assuming that "Mrs. Burke" later purchased Mr. Bradley/Chester Ice Company's "mammoth ice house" on Ridley Park Lake, it appears the ice house was never rebuilt, as no ice house is shown at the site on the 1909/1910 Mueller map.



1909/1910 Mueller Map, Plate 8, showing ice house on Burn Brae property, Baltimore Pike and Oak Avenue, Clifton Heights, Delaware County, Pennsylvania. DelawareCountyHistory.com.

21 DEC 1882: A force of men began filling the ice houses at Burn Brae [Baltimore Pike and Oak Avenue, Clifton Heights], on Tuesday, with ice as clear as crystal and six inches in thickness.

15 NOV 1883: Christopher J. Durham, colored, who boards with Stephen Lindsay, at Oakdale [Oakdale was near today's Springfield Mall, Baltimore Pike, on the Springfield/Swarthmore border], met with a serious accident on Monday, and it is feared his injuries may prove fatal. He was assisting in cleaning out the ice house of Frank Sharpless, at Swarthmore, when a heavy wind blew the ice house doors against him, throwing him into the ice house, a distance of 18 feet. He was picked up and removed, and Dr. Frank Rowland, of Media, was sent for. An examination showed that the patient's back was broken and that he was completely paralyzed by the shock. His recovery is regarded as hopeless.

22 NOV 1883: Christopher J. Durham, colored, of Oakdale, who fell into an ice house at Swarthmore on Monday of last week, died from the effect of his injuries on Tuesday morning.

14 JAN 1886: A force of men filling Dr. Goddard's ice houses, yesterday morning, with six-inch ice gathered from Silver Lake [Kingston Goddard lived on Bridge and Beech Streets, Morton].

8 DEC 1887: Public Sale of Valuable Real Estate will be sold on premises on Thursday, December 22nd, 1887, at 1:00 pm, a farm containing about 105 acres, situated in Aston Township, near Village Green, about 2 miles from B. & O.R.R. The improvements consist of a large stone mansion house, 9 rooms, highly situated (overlooking whole farm) large double-floored barn, stabling for 20 head of cows and 6 horses, straw shed, wagon house, carriage house, corn crib and shell house, slaughter house with ice house under and wood house. Address, T. V. Dutton, Near Sharon Hill, Or to H. Dutton, residing on the premises.

15 DEC 1887: Thomas Kent, a young man employed by A. C. Lewis, builder, of Springfield, near Morton, fell down an ice house on the Hazard property, near Secane, a few days ago, and was severely injured.

19 JAN 1888: An Ice House 16x18 feet in dimensions is being built by Supt. William H. Garrett. He will store away a large quantity of ice and serve it to residents during the sweltering days of next summer.

19 JAN 1888: Frederick Simons is having clear ice, between 6 and 7 inches in thickness, gathered from Burnley's Dam, in Swarthmore. Sylvester Garrett and others will commence filling their ice houses tomorrow.

16 FEB 1888: Clifton Items: The ice houses [probably Woodburne Mansion, Springfield Road, Darby, also known as Little Flower Institute] of Mrs. Thomas A. Scott, were filled by the Knickerbocker Company [of Philadelphia], on Tuesday, the ice having been shipped in cars to Clifton Station. Ten wagons were employed in hauling the ice from cars.

5 APR 1888: Some four or five colored boys have been pilfering boards from the neighborhood of Palmer's ice house, which they used in building a "cave" on the borough outskirts [Media]. A few days ago the officers swooped down on them, and they have since had a taste of prison fare.

10 MAY 1888: For Sale: A modern built 12 room brick house containing bathroom, hot and cold water, with three acres of ground, stable, chicken house and ice house. Plenty of fruit and shade trees. Situate on Darby Creek, near Heyville. 1 ½ miles from Clifton Station. Will be sold very cheap. Apply to H. M. Brennan, at Heyville, or John McCauley, at Lansdowne.

20 JUN 1895: Ice Pure Ice! Morton Ice Company has resumed its service for season of 1895 to supply artificial ice to Families, Hotels, Stores, etc. At lowest rates. The ice is made from filtered and distilled water, therefore pure. Orders by mail or drivers will receive prompt attention. Also horses and carts to hire and horses taken to board or pasture. William H. Garrett, Supt., Morton, PA.

13 FEB 1896: The college ice house [Swarthmore] was washed away during the freshet on Thursday last, together with nearly 200 tons of ice.

27 FEB 1896: [Morton] Charles Parker has purchased the ice business of Sylvester Garrett, and is having an ice house 18 feet square erected at his coal yard.

AN ICE-HOUSE.—It will soon be time for those who are without an ice-house to be preparing one. No well-appointed farm or summer residence should be without this luxury any more than without a well or a good spring of water. It is not only a great comfort, but a means of economy in preserving meats and fruits in the heat of summer, while one that will answer every purpose may be put up and filled at trifling expense. No elaborate house is necessary for preserving the ice. There are some requirements, however, that must be attended to.

First, good drainage must be secured without giving the air access to the ice through the drain. If the soil is porous or gravelly, no artificial drainage is required. It is not essential that the ice be stored under ground, as it keeps quite as well above the surface. The ice should be compactly packed and enclosed with packed sawdust, or tan bark, on all sides, and on the top to the depth of at least twelve inches. This packing is the great preservative of the ice. Ventilation must be given from the top and not allowed to pass through the ice. The larger the body of ice stored the better it will keep. The ice-house should not be less than twelve feet square on the inside, and eight feet high. A few square rods of ice will suffice to fill an ordinary house, and the depth of water need not be more than three feet.

A writer says: "My ice-house is built entirely on the surface of the ground. The only drainage is the natural slope of the surface, which is about one foot in six. It is fourteen feet square on the outside, and the posts are ten feet high. The walls are double, with eight-inch space filled with tan bark. The roof is also double. Inside and outside covering hemlock. I first spread three or four inches of gravel on the ground, then ten inches of sawdust. I pack sawdust between the ice and wall, and cover it a foot deep on top. The north gable end of the house is open all the while for ventilation. The ice wastes but a trifle."

Chester Daily Times (Chester, PA), October 22, 1877. Article describing the construction of ice houses, noting that they did not need to be underground, as above-ground structures worked just as well. The ice was packed and insulated with sawdust to help preserve it.

Historic ice house operation with an endless chain ice elevator in Maplewood, New Jersey. Photo found in an online auction listing.

Historic ice house operation with endless chain ice elevator, Conneaut Lake, Pennsylvania. Photo found in an online auction listing.

Cutting ice by ice house, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Photo found in online auction listing.

Ice harvesting crew, Antigo, Wisconsin. Photo found in online auction listing.

Icing on Silver Lake. Location unknown; however, this was probably a different Silver Lake than the one formerly located in Morton, Delaware County, Pennsylvania. Photo found in online auction listing.

Ice house with endless chain ice elevator on pond, Coopersburg, Pennsylvania. Photo found in online auction listing.

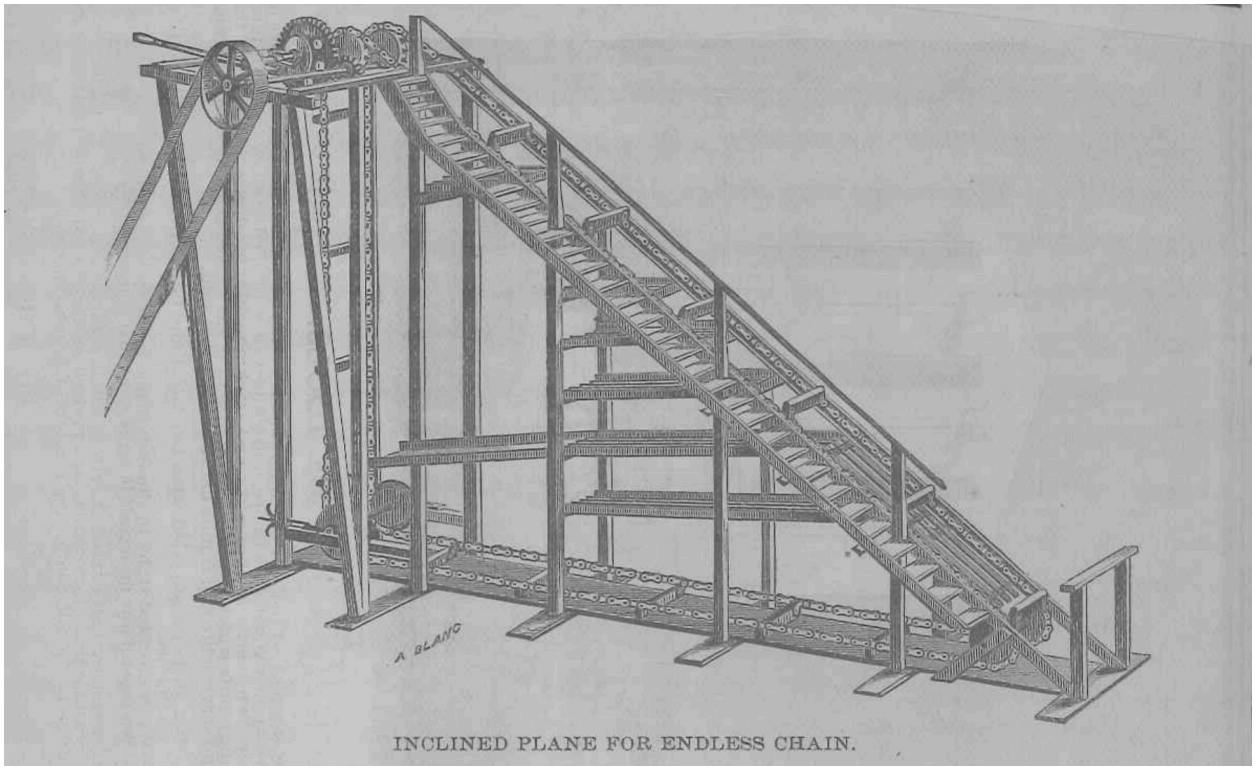


Illustration of inclined plane for endless chain from *Knickerbocker Ice Co. of Philadelphia, PA* (1874). Hagley Museum and Library; digitized by Internet Archive.

Employees inside an ice house with blocks of ice, possibly in Sandusky, Ohio. Photo found in online auction listing.